THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
The Importance of Our Unity

John M. Buchanan

June 4, 2000

Ecumenical dialogue is today anything but the specialty of a few starry-eyed religious peaceniks. For the first time in history it has now taken the character of an urgent *desideratum* for world politics.... There will be no place among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions.

There will be no peace among the world religions without peace among the Christian churches.

The community of the church is an integral part of the world community.

Peace is indivisible: it begins within us.

Hans Kung
Christianity and the World Religions

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR UNITY
June 4, 2000

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

John 17:6-11, 20-24 (NRSV)

"that they may all be one . . . that the world may believe." (John 17:21)

On the night of his arrest, as the net of intrigue tightened around him, Jesus prayed—not for his own safety and deliverance as might be expected, but, first, for his disciples: for us. He prayed: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Contrast his beautiful and passionate prayer for unity among his disciples with one of the worst moments in the history of Reformed Christianity, our branch of the Holy Catholic Church, the day in 1553 when Michael Servetus arrived in Geneva. Servetus was a notorious heretic already condemned to death by the Lutherans and Catholic Inquisition. He thought he might find refuge in a city where the presiding authority was John Calvin, lawyer, humanist scholar, reformed theologian. It was a big mistake. Calvin drew up a list of forty charges against him, the most serious of which was denying the doctrine of the Trinity and Infant Baptism. The civil authorities arrested him and Calvin agreed to his execution and Servetus was burned at the stake.

It is not a moment of which any Presbyterian can be proud. Professor Brian Gerrish of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond reports that Calvin's firmness in dealing with heresy was widely applauded. Apparently one of the things, perhaps the only thing, on which everyone could agree—Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians—was that heresy was such a danger to the Body of Christ that it had to be cut out. So everybody burned heretics. Now it was a different time to be sure, but I've always wondered if anyone at the time dissented, had the courage to object, and I was delighted to discover in Professor Gerrish's new book, *Saving and Secular Faith,* that indeed there was such a man. He is now a new hero for me and I wish there were a monument to him in Geneva beside John Calvin.

His name was Sebastian Castello and he was the rector of the College of Geneva. He had argued with Calvin and because that could be dangerous to your health, moved to Basel where he wrote two books about the time Servetus was executed: *On Heretics: Whether They Should be Persecuted and How They are to be Treated* and *On the Art of Doubting and Being Certain, of Not Knowing and Knowing* which was never published and which could have gotten him in a lot of trouble.

The "art of doubting" was not a topic for which Calvin and his age had much sympathy. In that age, the way to protect yourself when advancing controversial ideas was to put them in the mouth of a character in the book you are writing, a technique Galileo used very effectively to convey his forbidden ideas about the movement of the planets. In his book on heretics, Castello sets up a conversation between an anonymous interlocutor and the ancient church father, Athanasius, whose name is associated with a famous 4th century statement, the Athanasian Creed, which sets out the best classical, 4th century ideas about the Trinity.

As the old Saint drones on in the words of that creed, "So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods but one God . . ." the anonymous interlocutor keeps interrupting: "This is as if you should say 'Abraham is an old man; Issac is an old man; Jacob is an old man; yet they are not three old men, but one old man. If I were to believe this, Anathasius, I should have to say farewell to reason."

That was dangerous writing in the 16th century. But even more provocative—and delightful—was a question Castello poses to Duke Christoph of Württenberg, to make another point.

How, he asked, would the Duke judge his subjects if he ordered them to show up to meet him one day wearing white garments and instead, when he arrived, he found them arguing?

It's really pretty good. Castello wrote "Suppose further that the controversy was being conducted not merely by words but by blows and swords and that one group wounded and killed the others who did not agree with them.

> **'He will come on a horse,' one would say,**
> **'No, in a chariot,' another would retort.**
> **'You lie.'**
> **'You're the liar. Take that!' He punches him**
> **'And you, then take that in the belly.' The other stabs.**
>
> **Would you, O Prince, commend such citizens?"**

Professor Gerrish comments: "The moral is clear. When Christ appears, will he find his servants arrayed in white robes, living in Christian love; or will he find them arguing about the Trinity, predestination and other insoluble puzzles, and burning or hanging those who hold different opinions on these matters than do those in positions of power?" (p.37-38)

I read that vignette several weeks ago while the Methodists were holding their Quadrennial General Conference in Cleveland—a meeting that featured a lot of contentious discussion and arguing and a demonstration which resulted in arrests for some delegates, including our Chicago Methodist Bishop and a good friend of mine, Joseph Sprague.

The news out of Cleveland was that it feels like the Methodist Church, the second largest Protestant denomination in the country, could split apart at the next meeting, four years from now. The presenting issue is homosexuality.

At the same time we Presbyterians, not to be out-done, are gearing up for our Annual General Assembly, which will meet later this month in Long Beach. The issue will be the same. On the agenda is an overture which will allow congregations which do not agree with and cannot abide by recently added constitutional prohibitions regarding homosexual persons in leadership positions, to leave the denomination. An outside group, Soulforce, headed by Mel White, Jerry Falwell's speechwriter, who has publicly acknowledged his homosexuality, plans a demonstration with arrests, like Cleveland, but this time while we are at worship on Sunday morning. It will not be pretty.

On the other side of it, the leader of the most reactionary, largest, wealthiest group in our church, The Presbyterian Lay Committee, said recently: "You talk about an aversion to blood on the floor . . . to fighting . . .I submit to you that a bloody battle is exactly what we need to be engaged in . . .we need to fight until the battle is won." (Parker W. Williamson, cited by Robert Bohl in *A Moment to Decide)*

The enemy, by the way, with whom the battle is to be waged is not Satan—it's us, you and me.

Somewhere Sebastian Castello is smiling.

So, how important is this? Does it all really matter? Does it matter whether or not Christians get along and hold their churches together? There are moments when I find myself wanting to say "no, this does not matter. It does not matter to my people, or the city of Chicago, or the United States of America." The unity of the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church doesn't matter. Maybe it doesn't even matter to God. God is too busy with wars and starvation and AIDS epidemics and peace processes. God is too occupied with justice for oppressed people, and comfort for the sick and courage for the depressed, hope for the dying, to care much about whether there is one Presbyterian denomination or twenty or none. And I can convince myself if it weren't for a part of the Bible that I find increasingly and persistently disturbing.

I refer, of course, to our text this morning, from the 17th chapter of the Gospel according to John, and a particularly incisive sentence the writer says Jesus said, "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you sent me."

The 'they' are the disciples, the tiny community created by Jesus and his ministry. And it's a prayer, actually. They are at the table of the last supper and Jesus has a lot on his mind. Jesus is preparing them for his absence, preparing them to carry on his work and mission. At the heart of it is love—the love God has for the world, the love God has for them, the love God is. "Abide in it—live in it—this love of God," he tells them. And love one another because the best way to tell the world about God's love is to show what it looks like in the quality of your life together.

Now, near the end, just before they get up and leave the room and walk to a garden where he will be betrayed and arrested—that is, the last thing he ever says in their presence before his death—is this prayer. He prays for them. He prays for their protection and safety. He prays that they will not abandon the world with all its ambiguity and riskiness. He prays that their joy will be full. And, of all things, he prays for their unity "that they may be one . . . that the world may believe . . . that the world will see in their oneness the love of God."

Wouldn't he be surprised—no not surprised—wouldn't he be sad at the monumental way his would-be followers have chosen, over and over again in their history, to ignore one of the clearest things he ever said about their task and mission and very identity? That they may be one—that the world may believe.

We're not talking about a "feel good," superficial, "the more we get together and share our stories the happier we'll all be" unity. The unity which Jesus mandates is not an end in itself—it is for a greater end—"that the world will know." (See Beverly Gaventa, in *Texts for Preaching)*

How important is it? Han Küng, one of the most important and creative thinkers of our time, is writing recently about inter-faith dialogue and the role religious conflict plays in political, social,

ethnic conflict. If there is any hope for reconciliation and peace, Küng argues, it begins locally, modestly, right here—in Christian parishes and in the hearts of individual Christians. "The most fanatical, the cruelest political struggles are those that have been colored, inspired and legitimized by religion . . . .There will be no peace among the peoples of the world without peace among world religion. There will be no peace among world religions without peace among the Christian Churches." (*Christianity and World Religions,* p.442-443)

So wouldn't it be something if instead of internal conflict, the churches showed the world what respect and tolerance and compassion looked like?

Wouldn't it be something if instead of launching rhetorical broadsides against ideological foes, we found a way to show the world what the love of Christ looks like?

Wouldn't it be something if the Southern Baptists and Presbyterians and Catholics and the people over at Moody Church and St. James Episcopal and First Methodist, instead of eyeing one another warily, and condemning one another's positions on abortion and sexuality and Christology and consigning to eternal damnation everyone who doesn't agree—decided that the most urgent evangelical imperative in our mutual strategic plans was to show the world something the world has rarely seen—namely the love of God expressed in love for one another?

His promise—which we have never tried—is that the world would find that compelling; the world might believe what we say if we showed what it looks like in our love.

It was no accident that he saved it for the end, and no accident that he said it while they were still sitting at a dinner table. Even when we have not been as good at loving one another as he commanded, even while failing to show the world what his love looks like among us, we have somehow known here, at that same table, the importance of our unity, the reality of our unity, which transcends our petty differences and disagreements.

Somehow here, at this table, we know our oneness with those who have gone before us and those who will come after us, neighbors near and far, and even, thanks be to God, people with whom we disagree and don't much like. And here we know in ways none of us could begin to explain—God's love for us, all of us: love which surrounds us, enfolds us, holds us up—love from which nothing separates us.

"This is my body, broken for you," he said at that table. "This is my blood, shed for you—drink—all of you from this cup," he said.

And, praying for them and for us, "I ask that they all may be one, so that the world may believe."

Amen.

Fourth Presbyterian Church
June 11, 2000
Pastoral Prayer, John M. Buchanan

Your spirit, O God, hovers over all creation. In the beginning, your spirit created form out of chaos, and began the mysterious, magnificent process of creation. Mountains and oceans, forests and deserts, rivers and lakes, snow and ice, rain and a warm sun—and then, somehow, out of it all, life—your spirit, in the joyful, exuberant emergence of life: microbes and bacteria, worms and spiders; dinosaurs, gorillas and tigers—and in the fullness of time, human beings into which you breath your own breath, your spirit.

Startle us, O God, with the sheer miraculous energy of it all; the unlikeliness of life happening in the vastness of the universe, and startle us, this day, with the relentless energy of your spirit—still creating, still bringing form out of chaos, still breathing life—in the world—in the city—in the church and in our lives.

We give thanks, O God, for all of it—for the gift of our lives; for dear ones to love, for the beauty of art and music and human love.

But on this day which celebrates the coming of your spirit to create a people—a church—we give thanks for all the ways your spirit continues to come; for the creative energy of parents, lovers and friends; for the mysterious creativity of composer, painter, athlete.

We thank you for the way your spirit draws us to you and makes us restless until we rest in you. We thank you for the way you continue to create a people—your church—in all its expressions. And we pray today for brothers and sisters in the churches of our neighborhood and city; across the Presbyterian Church (USA) and all the churches of the world.

O God, send your spirit once again to create form out of the chaos we have made of things. Bring peace and unity, patience and love; bring impatience with division and inspire us all to be open to one another, to forgive one another, to show the world your love—in our love.

O God, we pray for peace. Send your strong and gentle spirit in all the places where ethnic and racial strife erupt in violence and perpetuate ancient hatreds. Bring peace, O God, in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland and our members who are traveling and studying peace this day. Break through impasses in Africa and Asia, and O God, we pray for reconciliation between races in our own city. Strengthen and bless peacemakers—those who labor in government and those who work to reduce violence in our country.

We pray, O God, for those of our number whose needs are urgent this day: for the sick, for those in hospitals, for those awaiting surgery; we pray for those facing the final mystery—be close to them and their families. And we pray for those still staggering under the blow of recent loss and the burden of grief.

We pray, O God, for ourselves: breathe your life-giving spirit into us, that we may be all that you want us to be. Inspire us to take risks for love, to care more deeply about your world, and our life together, to reach out in your spirit to your children in need.

Hear these prayers, hear the prayers that remain unspoken in our hearts, for we offer them in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who, with you and the Holy Spirit, reigns now and forever. And hear us as we pray the prayer he taught his disciples, saying—Our Father . . . . .